REDEFINING HISTORY IN TONI MORRISON’S *PARADISE*

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ABSTRACT

As a leading figure of the African American literary renaissance, Toni Morrison makes history a priority whether it is present, past or future. Morrison’s writing is a performance of her desire to bring in the marginalised history of Blacks to the centre and others to the margin. Morrison brings in all the historical past within the framework of present situation. She historicizes the different histories and contexts of black American struggle. Morrison’s *Paradise* (1997) presents a unique perspective on American history through a mysterious tale of a small town in rural Oklahoma. *Paradise* combines factual and experimental truths from African American history to construct an insistent counter memory to national American mythologies in order to investigate the relationship of truth both to history – the complex of actual events as well as that which becomes the sanctioned version of the past – and to myth – those stories we tell ourselves about what has happened. Specifically, *Paradise* explores the way that truths are constituted, maintained, and subjugated in the process of mythologizing history; a process Morrison suggests is endemic to national community.

KEYWORDS: Toni Morrison, Paradise, History, America, African-American Community

INTRODUCTION

Toni Morrison’s *Paradise* seems to be written in response to the failures of the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Nationalist Movement to bring about full equality and social justice for all Americans, what Martin Luther King, Jr., envisioned as the “beloved community.” *Paradise* replaces within historical record a past that has been excluded from it and raises questions that it has avoided about the exercise of freedom in American cultures. The novel is both a history and a critique of history. In *Paradise*, Morrison uses a multiplicity of religious beliefs to ground a new politics for post-Civil Rights America. The novel attempts to enact a cultural transformation by using the religious and spiritual beliefs of black women and men to rearticulate (African) American history and nation building in the hopes that this rethinking of the past opens up the possibility of re-imagining the future. The text extends the project begun in *Beloved* and *Jazz* of invoking traumatic histories, by using religion and spirituality in innovative ways that attempt to heal the pains of this history.

*PARADISE*: REDEFINING HISTORY

*Paradise* does the work of rearticulating African American conceptions of nation building by recounting the violent history of the citizens of Ruby, an all-black town in rural Oklahoma. Ruby is made up of descendents of former slaves who sought to leave behind the racial and economic oppression they experienced during slavery and Reconstruction. The citizens of Ruby guard against further oppression by establishing a rigid, isolationist code of behaviour that refuses to allow any new ideas, beliefs, or ethnicities to interfere with their sense of racial pride and community. The male citizens of the town begin to feel threatened by the alternative sense of community offered when a group of women of different economic, ethnic, and racial backgrounds start to gather at a former convent 17 miles outside of Ruby. These women willingly accept into their house individuals who have been marginalized by the rigid code of behaviour in Ruby: adulterers, unmarried pregnant women, alcoholics, and women fighting with their husbands or other authority figures in the
community. These women also work collectively to heal the violent traumas of their own lives under the instruction of a former catholic nun, Consolata, a woman who speaks to multiple deities, reads minds, and raises the dead. The town leaders are outraged by the idea that these women live without men or the Christian God in their lives. The novel opens with a group of men from Ruby barging into the convent and killing the women. In the novel’s climax, these women, including two who are pronounced dead by multiple witnesses in the text, escape into “another realm,” a spiritual door/window in the sky. However, rather than remain in this other realm, several of the women return to try materially to “right the wrongs” of their lives. The novel broadens its critique of communities based on the principle of isolationism and patriarchy by making Ruby a microcosm of America. The connection between Ruby and America is made explicit in the novel when it links the history of the citizens of Ruby to the history of the United States. Peter Widdowson discusses how the chronology of Paradise reflects key dates in American history. Chronologically, the narrative begins by telling the stories of freed black slaves in 1755, just before “the founding moment in American history.” (Widdowson 313) The novel further alludes to the creation of the Declaration of Independence, the American Civil War, the Emancipation Proclamation, Reconstruction, World War I, the attacks on blacks (including ex-soldiers) during the summer of 1919, World War II, the Civil Right Movement, the Vietnam War, Watergate, and the assassinations of John F. Kennedy, Medgar Evers, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Robert Kennedy. The text offers an alternative to official American history here, a history that is more inclusive of remembered black experience. Beginning the chronology in 1755 and setting the main action of the text in Bicentennial, July 1976, urges readers to consider how closely tied these characters are to the values and exclusions used to create this nation.

Paradise locates the origin of principles of exclusion in the creation of the black national community during the “Exoduster” Movement, the historic black migration out of the South in 1879. Newly freed African Americans migrated in large numbers to Kansas, and later Oklahoma, because of the failures of Reconstruction to bring full equality, political rights, and safety to African Americans. The Exodusters hoped that leaving the South and establishing more than 60 all-black towns would guarantee them safety, land, education, and full access to voting. The language of the Biblical Exodus story—was used to create a sense of commonality amongst the settlers rooted in a shared history of slavery and the desire for a future free from oppression. In the portrayal of Ruby, Paradise suggests that until it comes to terms with its traumatic past, a community created in opposition is destined to repeat exclusions similar to those of the community it is reacting against. The portrayal of the “peace” that the women at the Convent are able to achieve by acknowledging their past traumas suggests a belief that more enabling identities and communities can be constructed around spiritual connections and affiliations, rather than on divisions predicated on race and gender. Paradise identifies the need to reconstruct black communal identity by showing how the values that hold together the town of Ruby, Oklahoma, no longer serve but restrain its inhabitants. Set in 1976, the novel traces the source of these values back to the 1870s, when nine newly freed slaves from Mississippi and Louisiana gathered their families and some friends, and journeyed westward. The wagons carrying 158 people reach the town of Fairly, but the residents refuse the group’s entry, claiming that a lack of financial resources would erode local prosperity. However, the leading male members of the group attribute the exclusion to their own racial purity, believing that Fairly’s light-skinned blacks have adopted the dominant white prejudice against dark-skinned African Americans. Becoming “a tight band of wayfarers bound by the enormity of what had happened to them”(189), the group moves on and founds Haven, an Oklahoma town that flourishes for decades until many residents seek more prosperous urban lives after World War II. But the Disallowing, as the social exclusion at Fairly comes to be called, continues a century later to trouble the memory of the male descendents of Haven’s founders, fomenting their hatred of whites and suspicion of other blacks. When Haven disintegrates in the late 1940s, these descendents cling to values inherited at the disallowing, the values derived from strong communal identification. They believe that only a radically unified community
sustained by the same lineage, same experience, and same ways of thinking can protect them from the psychic and physical violence of future social injustice. Consequently, Haven’s dissolution prompts the male descendents to repeat their ancestral history. Rather than resettle in racially mixed or pre-existing black communities, they establish Ruby, a geographically isolated and self-sufficient town, and insist on maintaining strict homogeneity by excluding everything perceived to be different, unsettling, and contaminating from their new social haven. Thus, in her portrayal of Ruby, Morrison depicts an African-American community predicated on principles of separateness and superiority. Even though Ruby is a town where a “sleeping woman always rise from her bed” and walk around town safe in the middle of the night because “Nothing for ninety miles around thought she was prey,” (8) the text critiques the sacrifices and exclusions that were made to ensure this apparent safety. Although this all-black town was originally established to protect fully African Americans’ civil rights, the town leader wind up killing and oppressing women, deliberately setting high interest rates that divide the town members by socioeconomic class, and punishing individuals without “blue black” skin. Reverend Misner states, “They think they have outfoxed the whiteman when in fact they imitate him. They think they are protecting their wives and children, when in fact they are maiming them. And when the maimed children ask for help, they look elsewhere for the cause.”(306) Paradise urges a scrutiny of the African-American concepts of belief and nation.

Of particular relevance in understanding of how Ruby’s ancestral history returns in the form of a violent attack is Kathleen Brogan’s *Cultural Haunting*, an impressive study of the figure of ghosts in contemporary American multi-ethnic literature that signals a recovery of histories threatened by erasure or fragmentation. The writing of Marshall, Kingston, Morrison, and many others “define historical consciousness as a good form of haunting, in which the denied ghosts of the American past are finally integrated into America’s national identity.” (Brogan 8) This integration, Brogan continues, does not suggest that cultural haunting has strictly ended, but that previously unacknowledged ghosts have been “transformed into memories that usefully guide, rather than overwhelm, the present.”(Brogan 19) Brogans juxtaposes this constructive haunting with the notion of traumatic possession, where “one is locked into repetition, doomed to re-enact the past without relevance to present realities.”(Brogan 10) Possession characterizes the relation Ruby’s leaders have to their heritage, for in attacking the Convent they act as if past and present occupied the same temporal location, coming perilously close to being eclipsed by the history they seek to preserve.

To write history as fiction in the way Morison chooses to is, in Thomas Carlyle’s words, not to write a “linear narrative” of a sequence of events, but to try and capture the “solid action” of the ‘Chaos of Being” which is any given moment of experimental life in time—the infinite determining past bearing down like a cone with its point on the present. (Carlyle 55) What Paradise represents is an attempt to write several concentric histories of the American experience from a distinctively African American perspective. The novel, in other words, is a black history of the USA from just before its founding moment (the earliest date – mentioned three times [99,278,284] – is 1755). This bears out Morrison’s interview with Carolyn Denard while she was still writing the novel: “For me, in doing novels about African Americans, I was trying to move away from the unstated but overwhelming and dominant context that was white history and to move into another one.” (Denard 1-16) In an early review of Paradise, Patricia Storace holds the realization of this project to be the novel’s great achievement. She says: “Paradise … draws that black presence forward from the margins of imagination to the centre of American literature and history.” (Storace 64) In place of the expected story of specifically black experience as “a shadowy adjunct to the ‘real’ normative story of national life,” “the official national founding myth [of America’s white ‘Fathers’] is a shadow of [African Americans’] own, in a community where shadows are not dark, but white.”(Storace 65) Hence, Storace concludes: “Morrison is relighting the angles from which we view American history, changing very color of its shadows, showing whites what they look like in black mirrors.”(Storace 69)
The novel is a fictional intervention in contemporary American historiography. The novel may be read, therefore, as:

- A History of African Americans from the end of World War II to July 1976, and more specifically from the mid-1960s to 1976 – the period of political assassinations, Vietnam, Watergate, Civil Rights and black activism. As in *Beloved* and *Jazz*, *Paradise* reflects in the experience of black Americans “claiming ownership” of their theoretically “freed selves” in a period of rapid change.

- A History of freed blacks from the end of the period of “Reconstruction” (1877) through to 1976, ad therefore of the way their subsequent history is a history of the failure of Reconstruction. Significantly, 1976 is also the year nominated by the historian, Manning Marble (1984), as pivotal in the decline/demise of the Civil Rights Movement, itself now known as the “Second Reconstruction.”

- Ending as *Paradise* does in early July of the year of the bicentennial celebrations of the Declaration of Independence, a history of the failure of that Declaration so far as the African American population is concerned, if no other.

- A Black sub–textual invocation of the Pilgrim Fathers, and then the Founding Fathers. Morrison’s “Old and New Fathers” reinflect the American Dream – seeking a pure polity and freedom from a corrupt past in the Promised Land/New World of the West – and its failure.

- Contained within these other histories, a “herstory” of women’s position within patriarchy.

These various ‘histories’ are conveyed to us within the novel’s own encapsulating narrative history: of the experience of a group of African Americans from the mid-eighteenth century onwards, of how Ruby got to be, and how it got to be as it is in 1976.

Morrison’s families in other words, are descended from free blacks who were “in Louisiana since 1755.” Thus the ancestors of Morrison’s families on 4 July 1776 should have been entitled to benefit from the proclaimed principles of the Declaration of Independence – most famously, those enshrined in the sentence: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” Even at that point, however, the presence of slavery in the newly created republic gave rise to concern among the new Americans in respect of the Declaration, but, as the history of the next century proved only too clearly, such principles did not apply to those who were not white – especially in a Southern slave-owning state like Louisiana. That free black men in early July 1976 could act in the way they do in *Paradise* is surely Morrison’s fictional reflection on the United States’ failure to implement the Declaration’s principles in respect of a large proportion of its people. This view is expressed more explicitly in *Playing in the Dark*: “What was distinctive in the New World was, first of all, its claim to freedom, and second, the presence of the unfree within the heart of the democratic experiment.”(Morrison 48) Had the history of African Americans been different from the start, the novel seems to imply, then that event in 1976 might not have occurred. But that is only half the story, since the Declaration’s central “truth” is “that all men are created equal.” However unintended, the gendering of that “truth” also becomes a central issue in *Paradise*. In Morrison’s brief history of her families above, the next key moment is that period of national rebuilding between the end of the Civil War (1865) and the withdrawal of Federal troops in 1877 known as “Reconstruction.” It can be no coincidence that the “present” of *Paradise* lies between 1965 and 1976: in other words, precisely 100 years after Reconstruction – just as the novel “celebrates” the bicentenary of the Declaration. The novel is about the “failure” of
Reconstruct and the catastrophe it became for black people: not directly, by exploring their denials of rights and their suffering of racism, but because that failure somehow “explains” the shootings of early July 1976. Not for nothing is the novel’s present set in the key years of the “Second Reconstruction” of the Civil Rights Movement. What *Paradise* does, in effect, is to align the two Reconstructions by erasing the 100 years that separate them through its obliquely defamiliarizing narrative medium, and thereby makes an intervention in what has come to be called “America’s Unfinished Revolution.” After the Civil War, then, African Americans experienced a period when they were citizens who could vote, acquire their own land and seek their own employment. Constitutional conventions were called in the defeated states, and huge numbers of freedom attended them between 1865 and 1868. These helped rewrite Southern state constitutions and other laws to replace the Black Codes, and African Americans were elected to important posts, becoming Senators and Representatives, lieutenant governors of states, state secretaries, treasurers and judges. Therefore when Morrison writes that her families’ ancestors had “helped govern both [Louisiana and Mississippi] from 1868 to 1875” (99) and had been “elected to rule in state legislatures and country offices,” (193) she is again grounding her novel firmly in lived history. To indicate the specific historical burden of *Paradise*, African Americans, in their deep politicization during Reconstruction, challenged the nation to realize the full implications of its democratic creed—not least, by continually invoking the Declaration of Independence. Fredrick Douglass’s address, “What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?,” was a key statement here; speaking on that day in 1852, he had asked:

> Are the great principles of political freedom and of natural justice, embodied in that Declaration of Independence, extended to us? … This Fourth [of] July is *yours*, not *mine*. *You* may rejoice, *I* must mourn. … America is false to the past, false to the present, and solemnly binds herself to be false to the future. (Douglass 1824)

In the “Fourth of July and Black Americans in the Nineteenth Century,” Leonard I. Sweet gives an account of the terrible irony of this day “when blacks became most conscious of the contradictions of American creed and deed.” (Sweet 264) Significantly, it was only during the mid-1860s that black Americans celebrated the 4th July “as a day of honor rather than hypocrisy”; but even so, Sweet says, “the message remained the same: the revolution begun in 1776 was incomplete until blacks shared equal rights and privileges with other American citizens.”(Sweet, 271-72, 273) In other words, as central reference points in black politics, the Declaration and Reconstruction are intimately wedded together, so that the conjunction becomes doubly telling between Morrison’s present setting of her novel in bicentennial 1976 and the historical matrix for the creation of Ruby being Reconstruction and its aftermath. Ruby in 1976 bears witness to Douglass’s prophecy that America “solemnly binds herself to be false to the future.” (Douglass 1825). What the town of Ruby seems to represent, then, is a distillation of all the abuses and failures of the American democratic experiment in respect of its black population: it is at once the extreme of a cherished racial separatism. In this respect, Ruby is both a chilling indictment of white America (the failures of the Declaration, Reconstruction, twentieth-century reforms), and a celebration of black resilience, independence and honour (a triumph of the Exoduster spirit). But the latter, as reflexes of the former, come with a price, too. Morrison’s explorations of the American experience, black and white, are never without their ambivalences. Indeed, we might note in passing that, while whites are the determining context for Ruby, they are by and large a determinate absence; represented only by the phrase “Out There”: “Out There where your children were sport, your women quarry, and where your every person could be annulled.”(16) Instead, the focus is exclusively on black experience, on black racism (the “Disallowing,” the intolerant purity of the elite families), on black (especially patriarchal) prejudice. While Reverend Richard Misner’s view of the town’s males – “They think they have outfoxed the whiteman when in fact they imitate him” (306) – implies the macro-structure which has ironically created Ruby in the first place, the Convent
shootings in 1976 locate the tragedy squarely in the black community: “their selfishness has trashed two hundred years of suffering and triumph,” so that Ruby, “deafened by the roar of its own history,” has become “an unnecessary failure,” too. The ironies and ambivalences multiply here: a triumphant history of repelling racial injustice and violence has resulted, by way of its own virtues, in a situation which “imitates” the one it has been escaping from. As Missy Dehn Kubitschek has nearly put it, “In the critique of Ruby, Paradise confronts one of African Americans culture’s most sacred cows, the myth of unity and perfection in black society relieved of white oppression.” (Kubitschek 179)

CONCLUSIONS

Thus, in Paradise Morrison on the one hand offers a specifically black history, pointing to the culpability for it of white America’s “failures” to apportion basic civil rights equally, whilst simultaneously celebrating that history’s achievements and identifying its own failings. But, on the other, she seems to be offering a general history of America from the re-angled perspective of black experience; as she notes in Playing in the Dark: “Africanism is inextricable from the definition of Americanness – from its origins on through its integrated or disintegrating twentieth-century self.”(Morrison, 65) The history of black America over two hundred years, in other words, is the history of America over that period – and especially of the “failure” of its founding principles. Neither is this just a history of the way white America has treated black Americans: at a more allegorical level, it is indeed a history of the whole American experience.

REFERENCES